

Clearing a path between planners, planning policy and academics:

Perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of planning research (February 2019)

Prof. Aude Bicquelet-Lock, Deputy Head of Policy and Research

One of the main objectives of the 2019-21 RTPI Research Programme is to address the needs of the various stakeholders involved in advancing knowledge or enhancing the design and implementation of planning research. Underlying the view that our own research ought to speak to a variety of audiences and that planning research in general ought to be both inclusive and relevant to multiple actors, is the objective to strengthen a three way collaboration between planning professionals, academics and policy-makers. In other words – one of our main objectives is to reinstate the Praxis at the heart of planning research and to link it back to both policy-making and theoretical concerns.

1. Introduction: planners, politics and the academy

By virtue of its direct involvement with people and their day-to-day activities, planning inevitably has strong practical and political overtones. However, although planning (as a profession) was established to deal with an activity that sits firmly within the realms of politics and the polity, the relationship between planners, politicians and academics is notoriously complex (see for instance Dyckman 1986).

One aspect of the argument against professional planners is that, as the profession matured, some planners became entrenched within the day-to-day practice of processing applications and many forgot their purposes as planners (see Silver 2014: 103). As Williams puts it:

‘A preoccupation with process seems to have emerged in the last decade or so, at the expense of attention to substance. Planners need to develop and communicate a coherence of purpose, and not become overwhelmed with complexity and procedures’ (2014: 114).

One can question whether this preoccupation with process and procedures arose out of choice or out of necessity. Surely, a majority of planners would agree that the purpose of planning is to protect the public, to plan for sustainable development and fairer and inclusive communities – but many planners may have become worn down by the

technocratic and/or regulatory aspects of their role. Fundamentally, if the planning profession needs to articulate more clearly what its values are and if planners are to find a renewed sense of purpose, then academics and policymakers cannot simply chide the profession from the distant privilege of the 'ivory tower' or from Westminster (see Campbell 2014).

Concurrently, there is a perception – in some quarters at least – that planning academics have completely and enduringly retreated from the public and professional spheres. Research topics addressed in academic research are often considered not useful to practitioners and policy-makers in that they do not address relevant 'real world' issues (see Davoudi 2006). Even when topics are useful, they are often perceived as too theoretical or unrelated to current contexts. As a result, research outputs are often criticised for not aligning well with problems facing politicians and/or practitioners, or – when practitioners and policy-makers are approached to be involved in research – the resulting outputs can be highly critical but without clear recommendations on how to improve of current policies and practices (see Durning 2004). Such troubles suggest that there is still much to understand about the nature of collaboration and exchange between different types of planning research and effective ways of translating research in both professional practice and policy formation.

1.1. Fostering collaboration and exchange between different types of planning research

Although research forms a significant part of the work that planners do, the scope and the definition of what 'planning research' is, requires some clarification. First, planning research includes the kind of evidence that informs the day-to-day work of framing planning policies and making planning decisions. This might be data and research material that is regularly and systematically assembled in official or semi-official settings (e.g. census information, spatial datasets, property data, planning decision statistics or land availability studies). Second, planning research includes information that is gathered in ad hoc ways to support the particular planning task at hand (e.g. analysis of local land use patterns, stakeholder surveys or retail or traffic impact studies). Finally, it comprises of scholarly or academic research analysing the performance or outcomes of planning processes, exploring new conceptual ways of addressing planning issues and forming a robust critique of both the profession and its relationship to wider society. Hence planning research does not spread across *two* communities (as often observed) but across *three* communities:

- **Academic research:** Scholarly, critical and exploratory research that is generally published in peer reviewed journals, monographs or text books.
- **Commercial research:** Commissioned survey or research work generally carried out for private or public clients to provide data or evidence to support particular initiatives, projects or decision making processes. Often the outputs of this work become the property of the commissioning body and in many cases it remains unpublished.
- **Policy research:** Sector-based, context-dependent, ad hoc or official data gathering exercises. This type of research tends to be published in official or semi-official reports, plans, supporting planning documents, bulletins or official statistics.

Although academics, policy makers and practitioners all generate *expert knowledge*, the type of expertise of those involved in academia, policymaking and the planning profession are made up of different networks, operating to different rhythms and in different contexts (see Petts and Brooks, 2006). These research efforts generate outputs in a range of different formats which in turn are validated by different standards and norms depending on the organisations, individuals and fields of knowledge involved.

1.2. Translating research in professional practice and policy formation

Many barriers to exchange and knowledge transfer are ubiquitous across science, practice and policy and relate to the basic tension between the scholarly aspirations of research work and the specific drivers of practice and policy. Results from a recent survey assessing the research needs of Irish planners, for instance, point towards a serious deficit in the availability of research to support day to day planning efforts within the profession (O'Sullivan et al. 2016). A majority of respondents indicated that there was limited or insufficient supply of data/evidence to address the research needs of practitioners. The same survey confirms that the gap between academic research and practice remains wide. It suggests that planners in academia have a preference towards academically classified material while non-academic planners rank its usefulness at the lowest level¹. Worryingly, the survey suggests that the three distinct research communities mentioned earlier, produce research not for each other but for their own purposes.

Arguably, a recent shift can be identified towards academic knowledge produced in the context of public policy decision-making and professional practice – see for instance, the application guidelines for the Higher Education Funding Council for England and for the Economic and Social Research Council. However, collaborative exercises often tend to conceive of knowledge translation as an unproblematic *transfer* – as if *knowledge* itself was a discrete package to be moved from science (or social science) to policy (see van der Sluijs et al., 1998). For instance, looking at the interface between sustainable planning in local environmental research (the BUHP project) and policy-making, Evans (2006) shows that the expectations and involvement of academics and end-users were at odds. Epistemological closure and organisational differences between scientists and policy makers hindered the translation of local science into local governance.

In parallel, efforts have been made to build bridges between academics and policy makers – see for instance initiatives such as the set-up of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). New relationships between academics and select committees have been built to help politicians to scope new inquiries and to understand evidential underpinnings of policy issues. But although these initiatives constitute an important leap forward, collaborative work between academics and policy-makers still remain relatively rare and, at times, inconclusive in planning related areas (see for instance Newman 2014).

All in all, evidence suggests that there are still a range of barriers in research, practitioner and policy contexts to effective exchange and knowledge transfer (Krizek, Forsyth, & Slotterback, 2009). Most importantly, research activities remain fragmented across the three communities. Whilst this is not unexpected, it suggests that there is still a weak shared understanding of the purpose of research in planning and a lack of opportunity for

¹ Of planners in practice in Ireland fewer than 1 in 10 said that they consulted academic journals more than occasionally and over three quarters have limited or no access to planning journals.

planners to engage in a broad range of planning research activities and influence policy-making. This is not to say that there is no desire for closer shared working across these groups – in fact the opposite impression comes across in the survey mentioned earlier – but strengthening the links between academics, policy-makers and planning professionals still requires concerted and coordinated efforts, as well as constructive thinking.

2. Bridging gaps: building new models of collaboration - shared values and common interests

Before addressing questions regarding *how* to collaborate and *how* to facilitate knowledge transfer from research to practice and policy-making, an unassuming yet important question is *why* collaborate at all? After all, many planners would agree that research, practice and policy-making exist on their own – and that they can be conceived of as three separate ‘tribes’ or a joint community depending on circumstances (Durning 2004).

True, it is important to acknowledge that it is not always possible to get a recognisable benefit from collaboration but it is equally important to outline why collaboration might be important – especially in a context where traditional regulatory and governance models are being challenged while new policy issues require both innovative and concerted efforts.

2.1. Why collaborate?

Because they are not pressed to arrive at policy positions academics can inform policy positions in an impartial, thorough and rigorous way. They can examine problems deeply, challenge conventional wisdom, clarify issues, offer insights that are counter-intuitive and keep contrarian viewpoints on hold for future reference – one might even say that they have a moral responsibility to do all this. Arguably, universities (and by extension, academics) have a civilising mission – *Viz* to show how the pursuit of knowledge and reasoned deliberation are the best ways for a society to manage its contemporary and future challenges. But they also have the role of equipping and credentialing students for employment and serving the needs of industry – hence to engage in and produce research that directly serves the needs of professionals and the wider policy environment.

In fact, from perhaps a normative perspective – one could argue that while researchers, policy makers and professional planners inhabit different worlds and speak different languages the common desire to plan and deliver sustainable environments ought to be strong enough to overcome these barriers. From a perhaps more pragmatist stance, one could argue that there are current issues which simply *require* collaborative efforts. If we take the urgent need to build resilient cities in the face of terrorism as an example – this requires (and will require even more in the near future) collaboration between Big Data specialists, civil servants/ministers and, of course, town planners.

Thinking constructively and provocatively about how to bridge the gap between academic research, policymaking and professional planners requires a better understanding of the kind of cooperation that could mutually benefit the three strands. If exchange between planning researchers, practitioners and policy-makers is essential to the development of disciplinary knowledge, professional practice and policy-making, clearing a path between those three communities will require three courses of action:

- Leaving aside prejudices and stereotypes.
- Thinking about shared values and common interests.
- Understanding barriers to collaboration and devising new forms of partnership and knowledge transfer.

2.2. Beyond stereotypes

Fruitful collaboration between planning researchers, practitioners and policy-makers will only happen if we manage to see beyond common stereotypes. Some commentators, for instance, have argued that we live in an age of ‘post-factual politics’ where evidence has a limited role in debate and public policy (see Andrews, 2017). In reality, Government is not an ‘evidence-free’ zone. In fact, the lives of ministers and parliamentarians are littered with evidence – the major obstacle to reviewing evidence is often simply the availability of time. Other enduring stereotypes are that academic researchers lack the drivers to invest time in communicating findings to professional audiences in an effective manner and often lack the required communication skills to disseminate their work in a professional context.

In fact, while distinguishing between the ‘three communities’ is a convenient distinction that can be made when considering the use of evidence (or research) in academia, policy-making and among practitioners, it can also lead to an oversimplification. Neither planners, academics nor policy-makers are homogenous groups. Instead of operating within three communities, the relationship between these groups occurs along a spectrum of interaction where some groups of policy officials engage more closely with academic research and planners than others, and vice versa.

Importantly, academic, professional and policy making expertise are all valued and valuable when they are well-directed and well conducted. ‘Evidence-based’ research (even if its meaning is still disputed) has become the desired norm in academia, policy-making and among practitioners. Hence, despite perceived differences and sometimes troubled relationships the three communities do share common values and interests around the production and the implementation of sound and robust planning research.

2.3. Shared values and common interests

Research has a very specific purpose in the academic world, that is – to systematically fill a gap in knowledge. It requires an understanding of current research and scholarship, repeatable methods, rigorous documentation, and substantial quality control review by expert peers (See for instance, Forsyth & Crewe, 2006). In contrast, what many practitioners and policy-makers mean when they demand more research, or undertake it themselves, is to generate knowledge that is useful for solving a specific local problem rather than a question of broad interest. Methods are more flexible, documentation less detailed, and if there is peer review it is typically focused on outcomes.

Despite those differences, the three communities all share a common interest around the production of *relevant research* – that is, research aiming to tackle pressing issues and contributing, in an original way, to the study of under-researched topics. The underlying aims of a particular piece of research might be to improve the political context for planning or to strive to have an outcome in better practice, the research question will need to be relevant, original and to not replicate pre-existing work.

Another common interest cutting across the three communities is the production of *rigorous research*. All three communities have a common interest in the use, production and promotion of robust evidence. This means, thinking about data quality; promoting robustness at all stages of research and carefully considering the appropriateness of the methods used to execute the research. Crucially, this also means thinking about issues of transferability, that is – the degree to which the results of research can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings.

2.4. Understanding barriers to collaboration and devising new forms of partnership and knowledge transfer

The necessity to go beyond stereotypes and the idea that the three planning communities share similar values and common interests is *arguably* not a new idea. What is lacking, however, is a thorough understanding of the barriers to collaboration and a way to overcome challenges preventing collaboration between the three communities.

Evidence suggests that a critical challenge for knowledge exchange is access to research knowledge in ways that meet the needs and constraints of planning practitioners and/or policy-makers (see for instance Taylor & Hurley, 2015). Fundamental to this is the way academic research is published and made available. Much of the research base that could inform and improve practice is locked behind fee-for-access paywalls and rarely accessed by professionals. This is driven in part by institutional settings that reward critical theoretical scholarship published in high-ranking international journals.

In addition, research is also often written in ways that make distilling practical and localised implications difficult or time-consuming. Being time poor, practitioners and policy-makers usually prefer succinct and targeted information useful to the practice and policy landscapes. Rather than using relevant planning research, practitioners and policy-makers alike are more likely to seek input from other sources dominated by professional publications; professional networks; and popular media. In fact, some studies have shown that decisions, both at the professional and policy levels seem more typically based on experience and general views on “what seems to work”, rather than on research.

In order to thrive, collaborative efforts between planners, academics and policy makers need to be tied around common epistemic values and shared interests articulated and promoted in forum where access to research agendas are facilitated and cross-fertilization, communication and dissemination activities encouraged. Crucially, we need to rethink existing models of interactions whereby academic research feeds into policy making which then shapes professional practices. Rather than the sterilisation into academics first ‘taking account’ (of facts), separated from policy makers who then order the importance of these to standardise and regulate the *Praxis*, all groups ought to have the opportunity to be involved at each stage of the research and implementation process.

3. The 2019-2021 RTPi research programme: a ‘unified approach to research’

As a learned society and institute in charge of developing the knowledge base of professionals and establishing an intellectual basis for planning, bodies such as the RTPi are in a unique position to provide evidence to planning practitioners. We are also in a unique position to help develop and foster strategic partnerships for knowledge exchange between the various stakeholders involved in the production, dissemination,

implementation and assessment of planning research. Described further below are the practical steps that our new Research Programme will aim to take to clear a path between planners, planning policy and academics.

3.1. Keep the dialogue on research collaboration open

Barriers between research, practice and policy often relate to the lack of open conversations between researchers and practitioners. Researchers can struggle to target their efforts effectively where there is a lack of open dialogue from practitioners about the issues they are facing.

Our new Research Programme will continue our efforts to engage in open discussions about new ways of supporting access, increasing use and fostering ongoing collaboration between various ‘types of planners’. This will be done, in particular, through engaging our members in our research activities and continuing our efforts to assess the research needs of the various stakeholders involved in planning research.

For planning research to provide practical and creative solutions to issues such as housing, climate change and rapid urbanisation, it must be open to new ideas such as the transformational impact of new technology in helping communities to engage with and shape change. By keeping the dialogue on research needs and research collaboration open we hope to encourage ‘unlikely’ collaborations, stimulate debates, and promote the development of ‘disruptive’ solutions to the most pressing challenges that lie ahead.

3.2. Acting as knowledge brokers’/‘boundary spanners’

We, at the RTPI often operate as ‘knowledge brokers’ (or ‘boundary spanners’) – that is, we provide ways of bridging research and practice. For instance, we help demonstrate the utility of academic research for policy-makers and help practitioners’ research translate into academic research and vice versa. We have recently introduced two new linked initiatives which aim to do this.

Firstly, we have a new category within our Planning Research Awards, to which current practitioners will be eligible to submit research proposals. Winning entrants will receive £5k of funding towards their research, along with the support of an RTPI planning school. The results will be announced at the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference – an independently organised academic conference at which we present the Planning Research Awards. This will further promote networking between practitioners and academics, and encourage their attendance at the wider conference.

Second, in collaboration with the University of Liverpool (the hosts of the Planning Research Conference for 2019), we are planning a new, RTPI-managed and branded ‘strand’ of presentations at the Planning Research Conference. This will provide a platform for research which is clearly relevant to planning policy and practice but has been produced outside of the academic planning research community.

3.3. Connecting, advising and endorsing planning research

In addition to funding a wide variety of projects, we regularly undertake other activities crucial to supporting planning research. This includes commenting on, feeding into and endorsing projects undertaken by other research institutes or organisations. Most recently for instance, we have advised on a project exploring public spaces as places of social

inclusion, exclusion and integration with particular reference to migrant and minority needs. We have also endorsed projects around the health impacts of urban transformations and around upstream involvement in urban development.

Our efforts to connect and advise on planning research are also often articulated around the following activities – participating in meetings, workshops and brainstorming events; contributing to advisory boards or advisory groups; offering feedback; facilitating knowledge exchange; helping to disseminate findings and translating their utility to non-specialist audience; providing meeting and event spaces free of charge; giving advice on policy issues and making in-kind contributions of staff time.

In delivering our new Research Programme we will pursue our efforts to connect, advise and endorse planning research when we are not directly funding it ourselves. We believe that if we want to tackle the multiple challenges and demands facing planning, we need to support research in different ways and assist research endeavours as much as we can.

3.4. Promoting collaboration

Planning research often goes beyond the needs of planners. Our Research Programme can be conceived of as a global initiative aiming to tackle place-related challenges. To engender confidence among communities, investors, politicians and among all those who, along with planners, have a long-term interest in how places are managed, sustained and developed, we need to think about planning research as a ‘unified’ or ‘integrated’ effort.

As mentioned already, we believe that in order to thrive, collaborative efforts between planners, academics and policymakers need to be tied around common epistemic values and shared interests. These efforts should be articulated and promoted in forums which encourage cross-fertilization, communication and dissemination.

Our new Research Programme (in particular the research principles that we have developed) continues our efforts to bridge the gaps between different strands (or categories) of planning research. In parallel to those efforts, another way of promoting collaboration is to foster partnerships with other built environment professional bodies (i.e. RIBA, RICS, ICE). We believe that, at its best, planning can address the most pressing environmental, economic and social challenges of our time. However, collaborative efforts (i.e. uniform data gathering, mapping public spaces, bringing different professionals together in research) will be needed to deliver sustainable solutions to the challenges that lie ahead.

3.5. Bridging research and practice through collaboration: acceptance and understanding

An important precondition for gaining mutual benefits from the exchange between research and practice is an acceptance and understanding of the differing operating rules and logics of the three research communities. It is necessary for planning practice and planning research to accept the aims and interests of each other’s working environments. Some gaps have to be accepted and cannot and should not be bridged. But if there are common interests and common ground is laid, collaborations can be successful and enriching for researchers and practitioners.

Our new Research Programme seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice, and to help practitioners test new thinking. We believe that fostering environments which

allow practitioners to test out new ideas, perhaps on a small scale to start with, seems like a great way to increase appetites for new forms of collaboration. We also believe that there is a need for better models of how to incorporate different types of research. In order to be relevant to the three communities of research, these models need to avoid many potential pitfalls: bogging down the project in analysis, merely placing a veneer of research on common-sense or political judgement, or applying research to the wrong domain (for example, to a technical issue when it may be more useful in process).

3.6. Communicating research

Thinking about effective ways of communicating and disseminating research is perhaps almost as important as thinking about the way research is conducted. For research to be as relevant as possible to local government and to the communities they serve it should:

- Make a distinctive effort to be as 'jargon free' as possible.
- Make a distinctive effort to be visible and well distributed.
- Consider how 'concepts' can actually work or be integrated into the work of an everyday planning officer (and/or a policy-maker if the research is directed at a policy-making audience).
- Consider how 'concepts' and results of the study directly speak to the general public.

4. Conclusion

In developing and promoting a 'unified approach to research' our new Research Programme aims to address the research needs of planners (largely defined) and to strengthen knowledge exchange between the different 'communities' involved in planning research. Important practical steps such as – upstream and downstream engagement of practitioners, policy makers and the public at large in all research endeavours; clarity around aims, implementation and possible limits of research projects; rigorous research design and methodology; knowledge transfer at all stages of the research process – should enhance collaborative exercises between practitioners, policy-makers and academics. They should also facilitate the production of multiple research outputs resulting in – better practice, advancement of 'academic knowledge on planning issues and potential improvement of political context for planning

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